DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 400 HE 013 921

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TITLE Appointments and Disappointments: Six Years of Department Building. A Case Study Written by a Former Chair.
PUB DATE Jan 78
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Characteristics; *Administrator Role; Case Studies; *College Faculty; Conflict Resolution; Curriculum Development; Decision Making; *Department Heads; *Departments; Faculty Evaluation; Faculty Recruitment; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Interprofessional Relationship; *Middle Management; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teacher Dismissal; Teacher Selection
IDENTIFIERS University of Windsor (Canada)

ABSTRACT

The role of a department chairperson is considered, based on personal experience in six years of department building at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. The leadership position was assumed when the department was small, consisting of five faculty members. In six years, it grew to 12 faculty and to an honors and then a master of arts program. The importance of the department head in determining the coherence of the program is noted, and the major task of the department head is shown to be the establishment of a democratically functioning department. A major area of concern is the appointment of new faculty. The department head's role is to function as a chairperson in constant consultation with the appointments committee. This task involves assessment of staffing needs by the committee, involvement of the committee in composition or approval of recruitment notices, interviewing, and recommendations regarding selection. The integrity of the department head is an essential and valuable asset from the time of faculty hiring to the time of dismissal. As with the appointment process itself, decisions concerning termination of faculty members should be based on public and private consultation with staff rather than attempting to lobby faculty toward a particular point of view. The transformation of the department into a coherent academic program also requires an active and committed curriculum committee. The department head needs to take an active role in filling gaps between the individual course and the program as a whole. The operation of multi-section courses at the first and second year levels is considered. (SW)

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ED202400

January, 1978

Appointments and Disappointments: Six Years of Department Building

A Case Study Written by

A Former Chair

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Appointments and Disappointments: Six Years of Department Building

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Because academic departments are very different, depending on discipline, size, and age, the experience of department headship must be very different as well. In addition to differences in departments, there are obviously great differences in the personalities of heads. Nevertheless, I am happy to contribute these reflections on my particular experience of six years--two three year terms--as the head of a growing department, for whatever help it may be to other university faculty who are or who will become department heads in the years ahead.

In the months since I have returned to purely faculty status, I have been struck more forcefully than ever with the widely divergent views a head may take of a department. I believe that a department should represent a group of academic colleagues loyal and responsible to each other as well as to their discipline and individual specialities, advancing a program of studies and research commonly accepted by all. Another department head may believe that a department should be no more than a minor administrative unit, a necessary entity to schedule and budget courses, but otherwise an intrusion into the individual scholar's life. This latter type of department,

it seems to me, emerges more easily from the university setting than the former.

Faculty research, for instance, tends to be personal and outside of normal departmental budgets and equipment. But even teaching is a one-person show, whether at the first grade level or the graduate school level. The class is assembled, the door is closed, and the teacher functions in the privacy of the classroom. While at the first grade level there are provincial or state curriculum guidelines, more-or-less uniform expectations of achievement, and the supervision of a principal, at the university level the curriculum guideline often consists of a few lines in the calendar, expectations vary greatly, and supervision is often considered an impertinence.

The concept of academic freedom, advanced first to protect free thought and speech, has enlarged to include so many issues of teaching materials, styles, evaluation schemes and the like that a faculty member, especially once tenured, has very few requirements placed upon him to function as part of a departmental unit rather than as simply an individual who happens to be assigned to a particular department.

Why, then, do I believe so strongly that a department should represent a concensus of colleagues presenting a coherent program? First, because the sense of a discipline can be better conveyed to students in such a setting, and second, because only in such a setting will faculty members cooperate in department building along with career building. That this has occured in the Department of Communication Studies of the

University of Windsor, I would credit to a democratic departmental government functioning within a very strong framework of expectation that it should occur. The construction and maintenance of that framework is what I define as the major task of the department head. That task requires that the head be oriented much more toward the role of chairman and "first among peers" than to the role of commanding officer. None of this is possible, of course, without a faculty whose majority are willing to put in the time and effort to make democracy work, and to arrive at meaningful concensus. Any success I may have had, therefore, I must share with my colleagues.

The department headship came to me rather unexpectedly, and without having been sought. I came to the University of Windsor from the University of Saskatchewan in 1970 to join a new, small, one-man department. I was looking forward to, and was happy to do my own research and course development, and to leave the responsibilities of heading the department to the man who had created the department, and whom I liked, agreed with, and trusted to do the job. Precisely because of this relationship, I could hardly refuse when he asked me, toward the end of my first year, to accept nomination for the headship so that he could have the time to complete his dissertation.

I had reached the age, and stage in my career, where I realized that accepting leadership was now my responsibility, and that I could not expect to be free of those responsibilities forever. It was my good fortune that the department was small

at the time, though it had already grown from three to five at the time I assumed the headship. In my six years, it grew to twelve faculty, and to an Honours and then a Master of Arts program.

The origin of the problem of department headship, I found, is that there is no prepartation for the job. This should not be strange, of course, since it has been noted often enough that there is no preparation for the even more basic job of teaching in a university classroom. But whereas the beginning university teacher at least has the experience of being the recipient of instruction from many faculty members through his undergraduate and graduate school career, the beginning department head has little experience of observing department heads at work except in their public function as committee chairman. The variety of styles of leadership he has experienced is invariably far less than the variety of styles of teaching he has experienced.

So one day in 1971, in optimistic ignorance, I moved my books and files from one office to another, and took over as head of a department. There was no meeting for new department heads to be advised of what was most important in the job, nor even a ceremonial meeting at which hands were shaken and invitations given to call or come in for advice at any higher levels. I have no idea how common or uncommon this may be, but it was the fact of my experience.

At the time I began my headship, there was not even a department head's handbook. Though a handbook was subsequently

created and distributed, it was a fairly useless document containing quantities of routine administrative information which departmental secretaries already know. What a new head needs to know is not, for instance, what hours the post office keeps, or what forms are required to prepare an equipment requisition, but rather what types of documentation should be kept in personnel files, and what items, usually overlooked by faculty members, should not be forgotten by the head in budget submissions. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that sort of information to be published in a handbook, but it should not be unrealistic to expect such questions to be discussed at a staff meeting. My predecessor as department head would probably have dealt with these issues as I took over from him, but the department and its program made such rapid changes from the one year to the next, that most of the issues I faced were new to this department and had never been departmental issues before. To depend on one department head to instruct his replacement is too haphazard a method of operation anyway, for even where there is the best of will and good intention, conditions and requirements may so change over time that one person's experience will not be identical to another's. Indeed, my own experiences of one year were vastly different from the experiences of the year before.

A department, it need hardly be said, is the faculty which constitutes it. Where faculty members are competent, committed, and cooperative, morale is high and problems can be solved as they arise. Staff will trust each other, and trust

the department head to put the interests of the department as a unit before the interests of any single individual. In a growing department, therefore, one of the most important functions of the head, in the long term, is staff recruitment.

Since each new person appointed to the faculty becomes a colleague of earlier appointees, it is vital both to the appointee and to the newly appointed that this process be one by which the new appointee can join the staff knowing he is truly welcome by his colleagues, and the existing faculty can know that the appointment was their free choice and not someone thrust upon them by the head. I would emphasize that while my words may be obvious, the difference between lip-service and determined implementation may not always be so obvious.

Our Appointments Committee is elected, but the head of the department is the chairman of the committee by senate by-law rather than by departmental election. The head, therefore, must insure that he actually functions as a chairman in constant consultation with his committee rather than as a head who "knows best" what the department needs. For us, this started with committee assessment of staffing needs, committee composition or approval of recruitment notices, complete committee involvement in the interviewing process, and, obviously, committee agreement on the eventual recommendations to the departmental council and administration.

The first step in the appointments process, of course, is the assessment of just what kind of appointment the department needs, and expressing it in a Notice of Vacancy.

In the assessment of departmental needs, I sometimes found that the isolated view of the individual faculty member tended to focus first upon the strengthening of his own speciality within the department rather than on the needs of the program as a whole. From my view of the program as a whole and the patterns of student enrolment in classes, I had to counterbalance the narrower views. The process then worked toward a balance between specialized needs combined with desires for excellence, and general needs combined with requirements for course coverage.

Once the Notice was published, the vision of the ideal candidate agreed upon in the assessment process became clouded by the realities of the replies which came in. Except for replies which were clearly inappropriate, all others were referred to the Committee, which tended to undergo a softening process in balancing the ideal with the real people who were to be considered eligible for further correspondence or interview.

Sometimes a balance was hard to achieve, and patience and good will were needed until the Appointments Committee could arrive at concensus. Sometimes the Committee agreed to pass up a more distinguished candidate for one who fit the areas the department need "covered", and sometimes the Committee agreed that a candidate was simply too good to be passed up, and that alternate arrangements could be made to "cover" the department's course offerings. That each happened with the full agreement of the whole committee made a great difference not

only to the department and its program, but to the incoming faculty member who arrived without having to face the hidden resentments of colleagues who might otherwise feel he was forced upon them.

Some of our appointments, even with concensus, have been tinged with doubts. Seeing what it means when appointment situations are only "tinged" with disagreement or slight resentment, I can see clearly how destructive it could be to a department to have an appointment fully tainted.

I found that courtesies to both the existing department members and the potential department members were very important in the appointments process. With the existing department members, it meant going beyond communicating only to the committee as a whole, but also with committee members as individuals. It meant going into a colleague's office or going out to lunch together, and talking over the process on a person-to-person basis, not only where there were differences of opinion, but even where there was apparent congruence. Opinions and feelings may be shared in an informal private setting that may be forever hidden in the presence of a third party, no matter how friendly. My purpose in such discussions was not to gain ammunition for a future battle, or to conspire on parliamentary manoeuvreings, but simply to produce mutual understanding and trust. It need hardly be said that if the content of private meetings becomes public, or leads to later battles or conspiracies, the department head loses his colleagues' trust not only in the appointments process, but in every other aspect of his work.

The integrity of the department head is his most valuable asset, not only in relationships within his department, but with deans, vice-presidents, and his president. Like marital trust, integrity is a quality which, once violated, may never be fully regained; and like marital infidelity, the short-term gains which may accrue from violation of trust are never worth the long-term losses in relationships. Therefore, though I consider integrity in relationships to be an ethical absolute, I could endorse it even as simply a long-term strategy.

Relationships begin even before appointments are made, and for the potential department member, honesty from the application process onward builds confidence in the department. For applicants, even those rejected early in the process, integrity requires that the head take the time to write a letter to explain why that specific applicant was not a suitable candidate, and not to write some meaningless form letter about "not meeting our needs at this particular time." For me, this included, for instance, explaining to many excellent cinema scholars that our department needed faculty with more breadth in the spectrum of communication studies, and, for instance, explaining to many otherwise acceptable candidates that someone else was a bit more experienced, a bit more flexible, or a bit more accomodating to our conception of priorities in the discipline.

While I have had indignant letters challenging the committee's assessment, I have had many more letters from rejected candidates expressing appreciation for my explaining

the committee's position in such a way that the candidates need not wonder if he committed some secret gaffe. With candidates from whom further documentation requested, continuing courtesy in correspondence became even more important. And, of course, with candidates who were invited for interviews, the department head, as chairman of the Appointments Committee, and the department, as represented by the members of the committee and the department as a whole, were making an impression on the candidate even as he or she was on them. The expectations of a future colleague were set as much--perhaps more--before appointments as afterwards.

Relationships began at the airport or train station, and every guest of the department, whether invited to interview, to consult, or to lecture, was greeted by a department member and taken to his destination. This hospitality and courtesy suggested from the start that this was the accepted standard of cooperation in the department. In the appointments process, members of the committee were often asked to represent the department with initial hopitality, suggesting to both committee member and guest that departmental affairs are everyone's responsibility, not only the head's.

I emphasize this symbolically important activity because I have been surprised at the number of academic guests who have reported to me that they were not met at the airport, but were expected to take cabs or buses to unfamiliar city destinations, and to show up at the department office on their own. In reflecting on the cohesion and cooperation which marked the

Department of Communication Studies and its growth, courtesies and informal communications loom larger than institutional and other factors.

In the process of appointments, visits would be planned so that faculty could meet interviewees both individually and as part of a group. Guests would not find, as they sometimes reported to me of other interviews, that there were few faculty members who seemed interested enough to be on campus and to be available in their offices to meet with them. My role as department head was to affirm the expectation that staff building is the responsibility of the entire department, and that not only members of the Appointments Committee, but all faculty were expected to meet candidates and share their impressions with the Committee.

In the end, when all the interviews were over, the often difficult choice of one candidate over another was made by the group in long discussion and final consensus, regardless of the formality of a vote. Happy the committee whose choice was clear, and whose job could be concluded easily. But regardless of how difficult the choice, and how many compromises must be made, if there was agreement among the committee, the department could continue to function at its best.

This process did not eliminate mistakes. But the choices and compromises were recognized by the department to be the department's and not the head's. This meant, for instance, that deceptions by candidates were resented by the department as a whole, and not taken lightly as a problem that the head got

himself into and now had individually to get himself out of. And it meant that the mistakes of compromise were accepted by the department, and not simply blamed on the head.

The involvement of the department as a whole in staff-building was important not only in creating a group of colleagues who were more than a collection of individualists tied together by a single typing pool, but in creating the strength and good will to deal with staff failures when they arose. For with all the care humanly possible, not every new appointment will work out. As every university teacher knows, there is nothing as bitter and painful as not renewing an academic appointment.

For my first few years, the department was spared the agony of terminating staff appointments by the resignation of faculty who were disappointed in themselves, or in the department, or who sensed the disappointment of their colleagues. In my later years, there were cases in which the Promotion and Tenure Committee was split, and cases, fortunately unanimous, in which appointments were not recommended for renewal at all. The split decisions were accepted by the minority, and the department's ethos of cooperation remained relatively unharmed. A non-reappointment case, which was fought within the department and publicized to the mass media by the professor, might easily have led to polarization and distrust. However, although it created a temporary heightened state of emotion, there was no basic break in the departmental consensus and no lingering unpleasantness when it was over.

As with the appointment process itself, where I con-

ferred with faculty members both publicly and privately but carefully avoided conspiracy and manoeuvreing, the "disappointment" process also brought me into formal and informal sharing with colleagues which carefully avoided politicking, scheming, and attempting to lobby faculty toward my point of view.

The integrity of the democratic process within the department was more important, I believe, than the success or failure of a particular case. In the bitter case of non-renewal referred to earlier, it was impossible for the professor involved to actually believe that his non-renewal represented the will and the vote of the faculty freely arrived at, and to the end insisted that there had been conspiracies and pressures brought to bear on faculty. If he had been correct, the destruction of trust within the department would have been worse than his reappointment, and the fact that his case was so quickly surmounted is testimony to the importance of honest, straightforward headship of a department in preference to attempted manipulation.

The department is stronger, I believe, for having gone through the process of actually terminating a colleague who did not meet the departmental expectations. It is very tempting to tolerate deadwood in the groves of academe, but pruning yields a far more vigorous growth. Leadership toward growth and expansion is very pleasureable, but the department head must also bear the responsibility for leadership in painful cases of termination and retrenchment, recognizing that the major burden will fall upon him. The burdens of office can be borne,

however, if crisis brings forth the support of the faculty to maintain what all have built together.

The concern for the department as a unit, shared as it was by the significant majority of faculty, was the attitude which brought the department from infancy to healthy adolescence without serious injury or debilitating disease. In this case of termination it was especially important for me to feel that common concern, and not to feel alone.

Careful staff development created the climate and the pool of talent necessary for a healthy department, but staff development alone may yield only a friendly group of disconnected specialists. The transformation of all that academic energy into a coherent academic program requires an active and committed curriculum committee. I was fortunate to chair the committee myself before becoming head, and in the six years of my headship, the committee was chaired by only two other faculty members. While one was the most senior member of the faculty, and my predecessor as head, the other was, paradoxically, the most junior and initially untenured member. Both of them were elected and re-elected by their colleagues because they were both responsible, organized, and dedicated individuals.

While I was an ex-officio member of the committee, and it was usually beneficial both to the committee and to me that I be at meetings, it was equally important sometimes that I be absent. This was not to give the illusion of departmental democracy, but to insure its reality.

The Curriculum Committee became not merely the place

where individual faculty could bring their proposals for their own special courses, but became the committee where the aims and objectives of the department were discussed and formally described, and where courses and programs were developed to meet those aims. The needs of the department and its program were always given precedence to the desires of individual faculty to create and teach special courses. While this might result in disappointment--usually temporary since worthwhile individual courses would be postponed rather than rejected altogether--the departmental presumptions prevented any possible sense that the worth of the faculty member himself, or his area of interest, was what was being called into question.

To keep the entire faculty aware of the working of the Curriculum Committee, and to reinforce its overall place, agenda and minutes of the meeting were distributed to all members of the Departmental Council. At times when issues of long-term significance were in question, the Committee invited all faculty, and concerned students as well, to join the committee in its deliberations. At times when issues of concern to one or only a few faculty were discussed, those people would be invited. Any faculty member who presented any significant proposal to the committee, whether for course, or calendar, or program change, would always present his proposal personally, rather than by written submission only.

Since, in the course of the year, the pressure of deadlines and time simply running out at meetings would build up its inevitable frustrations in the Curriculum Committee, the

Committee began the practice of setting aside a whole day in December, and again in April, right after classes ended each semester, to organize a Departmental Symposium for all members of Council. The idea was my senior colleague's, but I was happy to encourage it and make it part of the department's operations. The value of these informal meetings has been enormous. Here, without motions, votes, and minutes, unfinished questions of the semester could be discussed openly and freely for the guidance of the committee and for the information of everyone engaged in the Communication Studies enterprise.

Such Symposia, in addition to their substantive value in providing guidance for the Committee and the Department in its curriculum development work, also had significant emotional value in bringing together all members of the faculty and student members of council in a relaxed, informal atmosphere, allowing for some ventilation of frustrations with the program, and for strengthening the sense of mutual involvement in the common cause. The topics of symposia ranged from such fundamental issues as the place of studio producation courses in Communication Studies to such daily issues as habitual tardiness to lectures on the part of some faculty. By facing problems at all levels, rather than avoiding them, they were out in the open where they could be solved or, at least, faced rationally.

I believe that the fact that these symposia were <u>not</u> chaired by me added to their credibility and acceptability to the group as a whole. What we had was not another Council meeting in disguised form, but a faculty exercise organized and

run by members of the faculty.

There were times, however, when issues or problems arose in the curriculum area which either did not come to the attention of the Curriculum Committee, or were best handled in an ad hoc way. Examples of this were problems of articulation between levels of a content sequence, or issues of overlap in course content. In some such situations, I was able to avoid friction by initiating private meetings of the faculty involved, either with me present or absent, as the faculty members preferred. In other situations, larger group meetings became necessary. But in either case, only the head could take the active role in filling gaps between the individual course and the program as a whole. In the best situations, getting faculty together to face problems between them was all that was required for solving them. In other situations, where no solution was ever found, at least issues were not left to fester and grow worse.

This can only work where the departmental atmosphere is one of cooperation and joint enterprise: where the expectation is that faculty belong to, and have responsibilities to the department and not just to themselves. Given the breadth of definition of academic freedom and faculty autonomy, no one can be compelled to meet, to talk, to contribute to the common enterprise, or to compromise on very much.

Compromise, or lack of it, showed itself most clearly in the operation of multi-section courses at the first and second year levels. There are no university regulation to govern the administration of multi-section courses, and no

official standing to course committees, course coordinators, or any other cooperative device voluntarily agreed upon. It had been generally accepted in the Department of Communication Studies that the large first-year level courses would operate by a committee of the instructors, coordinated by a senior instructor. I wish I could say that is was universally accepted for my entire term, but it was not. I can say, however, that the occasional instructor who insisted on running his own section entirely independent of his colleagues has not been supported or encouraged by them. Sections are not required to be identical, nor are instructors forced to use texts or techniques they find abhorrent, but common understanding should exist in all sections.

In second year level, where there are fewer sections of multi-section courses, I also encouraged instructors to coordinate their work, but again, I certainly could not force it. There were advantages in common understanding and mutual enterprise for those faculty who did coordinate their approach and share materials. If I had difficulty dealing with the resolutely lone faculty member who refused to compromise or even discuss common issues with his colleagues, the larger disadvantages were his. I would not underestimate how carefully I felt I had to deal with such situations so as to respect the individual's rights while at the same time attempting to preserve the unity of the department as a whole. Some of those problems have yet to be solved at what I would consider an acceptable level, but at least they have not become worse.

There are many other important aspects of departmental operation that I have not and will not touch. Many day to day problems were solved gradually over the dining room table in the Faculty Association Club, and I have found that it was often easier to reach agreement over a bowl of soup than over a sheaf of committee reports. Not everyone convened at the luncheon table, however. Some had time constraints, while others were shy, or even tense with colleagues. Some of these tensions had been long-lasting, stemming from personal conflicts. Most tensions have dissipated. For myself, at least, I have found that once a tense situation has passed, whether I was right or wrong as part of it, reconciliation has been possible.

As I write this almost a year after leaving office, I see changes in the department and its administration. Perhaps this means that my perception of the department's satisfaction with my approach is more self-serving than honest; I cannot say. But I can say that I have few regrets, and that now I am a peer among others in the department, I can face all my colleagues with confidence.

Though I would have wanted to know at the beginning of my term what I know now, I wonder if I would have listened. The only traumas of my term of office were related to faculty terminations, both successful and unsuccessful. I doubt, given my naive trust in university teachers as a collectivity of gentlemen, that I would have believed in the wisdom of writing admonitions and reprimands. At this point, in theory at least, I would remind any new head--in this era of bureaucracy, union,

and litigation--that it is far easier to destroy documents in personnel files when they are no longer pertinent than to face contemporary administration without them.

The dilemma in commiting to writing every personnel problem of the type I dealt with orally is that the recipient of memoranda of admonition and reprimand will be even more convinced that the head is "out to get him." This will make confrontation more likely, and cooperation less likely. Despite my distaste for it, however, my experience would compel me to assert at least some importance to committing to writing the faults as well as the accomplishments of faculty--so long as the writing did not substitute for personal face-to-face relationship. My unwillingness to place negative material in personnel files in the early years of my term stemmed from naive goodwill; it seemed petty and bureaucratic to commit to writing situations which were less than drastic. I recognize now that it was my responsibility to do so more often, so long as I continued to make every effort to maintain a personal relationship as well. The promotion and tenure process, when it goes sour, becomes a bitter exercise where gentlemanly conduct is replaced by quasi-legal and even legal processes.

Though our faculty has just entered into a collective agreement with the Board of Governors of this university, it does not appear to me that the task of heading a department has altered because of it. The greatest overall difficulty in my department headship--and in the place of the department in the structure of university governance itself--came from

having the responsibility for the department as a whole, without the authority to compel anything. The new contract has not changed that. But the greatest satisfaction, far outweighing any dissatisfaction, came from creating the atmosphere where the faculty freely and cooperatively joined in a common effort. Atmosphere lies outside the contract altogether. The pleasure of creating such an atmosphere, and of leading and working with bright, friendly colleagues in the building of a department, is one which was worth every effort and responsibility of my six years as department head.